

Thetis in *Iliad* 24

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The *Iliad* is a gripping story: it starts with a mighty quarrel between Achilles – the son of a goddess and the best Achaean warrior – and king Agamemnon, who abuses his power and deprives Achilles of his favourite slave and concubine Briseis. The episode leads Achilles to question why he fights at all. In order to spite Agamemnon, he withdraws from the war, until his best friend Patroclus is killed. At that point, Achilles enters the battlefield again, and avenges Patroclus by killing Hector, best of the Trojans. In book 24, Priam, the Trojan king and father of Hector, begs Achilles to release the body of his son: Achilles is reminded of his own father Peleus, who will soon lose his own son, and agrees. The poem ends with Hector's funeral and foreshadows Achilles' imminent death. Through this simple narrative, the *Iliad* confronts us with many issues we had rather forget altogether: the failures of leadership, the brutalising impact of war, and our ultimate fate of death.

This article focuses on the last book of the *Iliad* and explores how Thetis – the divine mother of Achilles – mourns for her son. Readers usually focus on the role of the bereaved fathers Priam and Peleus, but Thetis mourns too – in her own peculiar way. Her behaviour sheds light on some key concerns in the *Iliad*: the differences between mortals and immortals, and the meaning of life and death to both.

The last book of the *Iliad* offers an extended reflection on mortality and mourning: it starts with the encounter between Achilles and Priam, both of whom have recently been bereaved, and ends with the funeral laments for Hector. The gods play only a minor role in this book, partly because they are far less affected by death than mortals. Thetis is the exception: though a goddess, she mourns for her son Achilles. Her behaviour in book 24 deserves close attention because it sheds an unusual light on the main themes in the book. Her sorrow, and the peculiar way in which she expresses it, is perhaps best understood by considering, first, how human beings react to the death of those they love.

Priam and Achilles: human sorrow

Book 24 opens with a description of Achilles' grief at the death of Patroclus (24.3–13):

...Achilles wept ceaselessly

as he remembered his dear companion, and sleep that subdues all took no hold of him. He tossed and turned, thinking with longing of Patroclus, of his manhood and his valiant strength, of all that he had accomplished with him and the trials he had endured, of wars of men undergone and the arduous crossing of seas. As he called all this to mind he let fall huge tears, lying at one time on his side and at another on his back, and then again on his face; then he would rise to his feet and wander distraught by the shore of the salt sea, and would never fail to see the Dawn as she appeared over the sea and its shores.

The *Iliad* describes in great detail the physical impact of Achilles' loss. When he hears that Patroclus has been killed, he throws himself into the dust, tears out his hair, disfigures his face and lets 'black

ashes settle all over his fragrant tunic' (18.25). For many days he cannot eat or sleep; indeed, even after he has killed Hector and thus avenged his friend, he remains physically affected by Patroclus' death. When Priam hears that his son Hector has died, his reaction is similar to Achilles': he covers himself in dung (22.414, 24.162–5), suffers from insomnia (24.635–40), and is unable to eat (24.599–620). Achilles and Priam mirror each other in their grief: they behave in the same way, and suffer the same symptoms. Their loss is so great that they find it hard to stay alive themselves.

The goddess Thetis: immortal grief

When the poet describes Thetis' grief he does not offer any physiological detail – and that is understandable. Thetis is an immortal goddess: it makes little sense to suggest that she needs to eat or sleep to stay alive. She belongs to a different realm altogether, and actually mourns for her son in a cave at the bottom of the sea. We cannot imagine how she can live or breathe down there, and the poet does not encourage such lines of enquiry. He never suggests that Thetis experiences a physical breakdown, or that she feels the urge to defile herself. We are only told that she puts on 'a deep-blue veil, the darkest garment' (24.94), and that sign of mourning is hard enough for a goddess to bear. There is another detail that marks out Thetis' grief as different from that of the human characters in book 24: she mourns the fate of her son while he is actually still alive (24.83–6):

...Thetis was in a hollow cavern, and around her the other sea goddesses were seated, gathered together, while she in their midst was lamenting the fate of her blameless son, who was to die, taken from her, in rich-soiled Troy, far from his native land.

This passage underlines the physical and temporal separation between Thetis and Achilles. She is far away and mourns for him before he is actually dead. Time matters little for a goddess like Thetis: she knows, with utter certainty, that her son is 'short-lived'. Human beings lack that kind of certainty: they fear and hope for their lives until their very last moment. Even

Achilles, who is usually quite clear about his lack of future, refuses to contemplate the details of his impending death: when Hector, moments before drawing his last breath, tells Achilles that he too is about to die in front of the Scaean Gates, Achilles refuses to engage with that information and answers curtly that he will die ‘when-ever’; Hector, by contrast, must die ‘now’ (22.365). That is all that matters, for human beings: whether we die ‘now’ or ‘whenever’. For Thetis, such distinctions seem rather minor. In her own distant and eternal realm, she laments for her short-lived son before his hour has actually come.

Grieving for the living: Andromache and Thetis

There is, in fact, another character in the *Iliad* who mourns for the living: Andromache performs something close to a funeral lament in front of her living husband Hector. When he insists on returning to the battlefield despite her moving performance, she goes back home and communicates to her servants her urge to mourn (6.500):

So they wept for Hector in his house, while he was still alive.

Ancient commentators considered this behaviour not just bad manners, but a bad omen. And, indeed, they had a point: Andromache’s pre-emptive mourning is a scandal. The only reason why she receives sympathy, both in the text itself and in later responses to the *Iliad*, is that Andromache is reacting to the even greater scandal that is war. Hector insists on fighting, and she puts on a funeral performance.

Thetis’ lament is quite different in kind. It is not a bad omen, because Thetis does not deal in omens: she knows Achilles’ fate. For her, the future is as certain as the past. It is only when she meets Achilles that she starts paying attention to the rhythms of a human life (24.128–32):

‘My child, how long will you eat your heart out with grieving and lamentation, giving no thought to food or to bed? It is indeed a good thing to lie with a woman, since your life will not be long and I shall lose you, and already death and your harsh destiny stand beside you.’

Here Thetis comes close to talking like an ordinary mother (and, indeed, aspiring grandmother). Achilles is mortal and Thetis gives him advice that is appropriate to his condition: he should look after himself, eat, sleep, and have sex with a woman. Thetis’ words echo those of many other wise women in the course of time.

In the Old Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, for example, the ale-wife Siduri tells the semi-divine Gilgamesh that he will never become immortal, and should therefore concentrate on ordinary human pleasures:

*‘You will not find the eternal life you seek.
When the gods created mankind,
they appointed death for mankind,
kept eternal life in their own hands.
So, Gilgamesh, let your stomach be full,
day and night enjoy yourself in every way,
every day arrange for pleasures.
Day and night, dance and play,
wear fresh clothes.
Keep your head washed, bathe in water,
appreciate the child who holds your hand,
let your wife enjoy herself in your lap.’*

Women, love, life, and death

Thetis does not go into the same detail as Siduri, but the thrust of her advice is similar. There is a rhythm to life, and there are brief pleasures that women can offer. Like the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the *Iliad* makes that point very clearly. In book 6, for example, when Hector enters into the city of Troy on an errand, he meets the most important women in his life – and they all show concern for his physical wellbeing. Hecuba offers him some wine to prop up his strength; Helen invites him to sit down and rest a little in her company (and we all know how alluring that prospect is); and Andromache performs her funeral lament, hoping that she may keep Hector safe inside the city. Hector rejects all offers of comfort and safety, choosing instead to go out and fight. When he dies, the work of women is exposed in all its futility: they gave him life, nourished him, and attended to all his needs. And now he is dead. Andromache claims that she will burn all the fabric she has woven (22.510–14): years of work will go up in flames, because she can no longer keep Hector clothed and warm.

Achilles: the mortal hero

The funeral laments for Hector end the poem: Andromache, Hecuba, and Helen have the last word, and they express their utter dependence on Hector. By comparison, Thetis’ pre-emptive lament at the beginning of book 24 seems rather detached: there is, after all, no real need or dependence on her part. She remains a goddess, even in her grief. Achilles too remains semi-divine: he is greater, stronger, more impressive, less encumbered than Hector – partly because he is

not weighed down by family. And yet, Thetis recommends to him ordinary human comforts: eating and sleeping with a woman. We know that Achilles listens to her advice because, after sharing a meal with Priam, he goes to bed with Briseis (24.675–6). For all that the *Iliad* insists on Achilles’ unique status as the son of a goddess, Thetis’ final advice to her son suggests that there is something to be gained from an ordinary human existence, and from the love of mortal women.

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